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Examiners' Report/ Principal Examiner Feedback

June 2011

GCE Music Technology (6MT01)
Paper 01
Portfolio 1

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General Introduction

There were some small changes in this year's results which resulted in a rise in the mean mark. This was partly due to a further improvement in the quality of the two assessed logbook answers. Also, it was generally felt by the examining team that the sequencing task was a little easier than that of last year and although this did not give rise to a significant change in the overall standard it was felt that the weaker candidates did rather better.
However, the broad pattern of previous years' submissions was maintained, with the multi-track recordings being the stronger pieces of work and the arrangements the weaker.

Sequenced Realised Performance

Candidates tend to approach this task in one of three ways; those who enter data incorrectly, those who enter it accurately but with a mechanical result, and those who produce a musical performance with editing, shaping and attention to detail. This year, most submissions fell within the 21-25 (competent) mark descriptor.

There were a few instances of incomplete submissions and work where the data entry was inaccurate to the point of being unmusical.
A common mistake here was to copy parts to the wrong section, or to forget to stop a loop, thus creating uncomfortable harmonies and cluttered textures.

Pitch and rhythm

Whilst there were fewer melodic parts than last year's track, the challenges of *Colourless Colour* were to articulate the (quite complex) main riff, realise the varied drum patterns, provide phrasing and articulation in the vocal parts and identify details that were not included in the score. The middle section needed to be effectively contrasted and to build to the final chorus.

Many candidates still work from the given skeleton score without careful aural analysis of the track itself and it is very important to bear in mind that many details (see below) are omitted in the scores that are produced for this unit. These are intended only to be a starting point and guide. The candidates who performed best at this task were those who went beyond the score.

Common problems included:

- placing parts in the wrong octave (easy to do if you are working with changing timbres or entering data from a small MIDI keyboard)

- omitting the lead line in the chorus (which was not notated and which was faint in the mix)
- omitting the synthesiser part (S5) in verse two (not notated in the score)
- reproducing the stop bar (bar 92 - not notated in the score) inaccurately, or not at all
- omitting drum fills
- mis-aligning parts

Timbre and mix

Not all timbres chosen were suitable. The vocal part does not lend itself to timbres with a sharp attack, like a piano; such timbres are difficult to edit so as to create a musically-shaped line.
Candidates who omitted timbres, for example, by missing out a part, failed to access the full marks for this criterion.
Many examiners commented on poor balance which was often surprising when a candidate seemed able to create an effective balance in their multi-track recording. Backing vocals were frequently lost in the mix, or the drums were too loud.

Musicality

Many marks are always lost in these criteria because of lack of, or poor, articulation and phrasing, especially in the vocal part.
Candidates should check the score which often provides some clues in terms of accents, staccato marks and vocal intonation.
Whilst there are few extreme changes of dynamic in this style of music there is often a sense of 'lift' at choruses or at the exit from a middle section. It is important to listen for such variations in the recording and to reproduce them in the sequenced realisation.

Music technology skills

Candidates should study the mark scheme for this part of the task, as there is a reference to chopped beginnings and endings, often ignored. Work should always be checked to ensure that the lead-in and lead-out is not excessive (no more than 5 seconds) and that details such as a reverb tail or the decay of a synth pad is not cut off.

Multi-track Recording

As in the past, this tended to be the best done of the three tasks. The most successful centres were those that chose to keep things simple; vocals, guitars, percussion, DI keyboards. Too many candidates fall into the trap of being over-ambitious or failing to realise that their favourite track is not necessarily the most suitable for exam purposes. It is also advisable to make sure that the musicians are able to play the chosen song and that they are properly rehearsed. Although neither the performance nor the arrangement are assessed, a poor performance often results in a poor recording. Also, it is not permitted to employ a sequenced drum track nor, indeed, any other sequenced part.

This year the examiners reported rather more incidences of candidates adopting dubious means with which to meet the task requirements in terms of the track and microphone count. These ranged from the use of unsuitable recording set-ups to outright cheating. Centres should note that the following actions will almost certainly lead to a loss of marks:

- recording tracks with an inappropriate number of microphones (eg two mics on a bass amp)
- recording two instruments with a single stereo mic and counting this as two mics/tracks
- recording only the drum track and bass part of the song whilst still meeting the required number of mics/tracks (thus submitting a song that is regarded as 'incomplete' according to the mark scheme)
- using the studio software to copy a previously recorded track onto a second track

More serious instances involved candidates copying each other's audio tracks or, worse still, groups of candidates sharing the same audio and simply remixing it. Such practices are easy to detect.

Capture

Some recordings lost marks because of noise - talking and fidgeting at the start and end which needed to be edited out, and guitar amp hum. Generally, though, capture was well handled and most centres seem to be well equipped with microphones and studio facilities. However, there was often some quite intrusive room ambience on some recordings which suggested poor positioning.

Processing

It was under this criterion that marks tended to be most frequently lost. Dry vocals and dull drum tracks were a common problem. Choice of song has a direct bearing on the demands made on the candidate's compression skills – a track in which there are sudden power chords on a guitar, or sudden and loud drum entries will be harder to process than one with a simpler dynamic profile. Also, singers who have a tendency to drift off mic, or who shout the choruses, may need coaching.

Balance and blend

Generally recordings were well balanced – better than the sequences in Task A. The instruments and voices most commonly lost in the mix were the bass and backing vocals.
Some candidates offered tracks taken from a specific style or period in popular music - for example, *Waterloo Sunset* or a Motown classic – which have characteristic production features. It is always helpful for attention to be drawn to this in the log, so that the examiner can accurately judge the candidate's intentions.

Creative Sequenced Arrangement

Styles were equally balanced but the most popular song was *Sweet Child o' Mine* (75%) in a synth pop style.

Overall, the synth pop arrangements were more successful. Marks were gained through the creative use of synth timbres and the style is one which lends itself naturally to sequencing. Nonetheless, a number of candidates attempted to force fit the 12/8 time signature of *Hallelujah* into a synth pop style which was less successful.

There were also some excellent reggae arrangements achieving full marks. Although this style is harder to sequence this left plenty of scope for rhythmic development, brass and steel pan timbres and textural effects based on dub techniques.

Stylistic accuracy was not always fully secure. Many of the synth pop arrangements were too close to contemporary electronica and many of the reggae offerings relied on offbeat chords with little else to suggest an authentic groove.

Each year the arrangement has usually been the weakest of the three tasks, many candidates simply adding a backing to the given stimulus which was played through, straight off the page. As with Task 1A, the best work involved taking a creative leap.

Some strategies to adopt in creating an effective arrangement are:

- adding a contrasting middle section
- using material from the original that is not included in the stimulus
- adding new material; countermelodies, solos, instrumental fills
- textural variety - solos and breakdowns (if stylistically appropriate)
- structural variety – creating some contrast between the sections
- changing or extending the harmony

<u>Use of music technology</u>

It was under this criterion that most candidates secured reasonably good marks and examples of work gaining less than half marks were uncommon.

The mark scheme identifies several features; timbre, balance, use of stereo field articulation and phrasing. It was articulation and phrasing that were most frequently absent (as was also the case in Task A), so that a mechanical piece of work failed to gain full marks under this criterion.

<u>Optional criteria</u>

It is often felt by the examiners that candidates fail to give enough attention to these criteria. There are marks available for melodic and rhythmic material that is *added*.

This includes material that is not included in the stimulus - bass lines, drum tracks, chord voicings and inner parts – as well as entirely new material.

Lack of understanding of harmony was a common problem. Amongst the weaker submissions parts were added that did not fit the chords and chord progressions wandered without a clear sense of direction. Poor control of harmony has a knock-on effect in other criteria too – an arrangement that has been compromised by these insecurities is rarely very convincing overall.

The logbook

These varied, from logs which included photographs of mic set-ups and screen shots of every process employed, to sketchy accounts involving several blank pages. Apart from the two assessed questions 9 and 10, the log is an important source of information for the examiner who refers to it when marking. If features are not clearly identified they may not receive the full credit they deserve.

In particular, reference should be made to any editing of the timbres in Task A. It is also important to explain clearly the mics used and the tracks to which they relate.
Settings of processors should be included in the track sheets.

The quality of the written answers to Questions 9 and 10 were slightly better this year, although this part of the unit is the least well done of all the tasks and many potential marks are lost here. Centres are reminded that it is worth 20 marks. This represents half of those available for the more apparently substantial Tasks A, B and C and so they are not given away lightly, the more so because it can (or should be) thoroughly prepared before writing up.

Many candidates fail to address the question.

Question 9 requires the candidate to explain how the arrangement was developed from the stimulus. Few actually provide an explanation, simply stating 'I changed the melody'. This does not provide enough detail to access the higher marks which require specific examples with locations. In preparing this answer it is important to address the following;

- what was developed?
- how was it developed?
- where is it located in the arrangement?
- how did this contribute to the arrangement as a whole?

Similarly in Question 10, a full answer to this question involves correct identification of the stylistic features of the chosen style *and* an explanation of how these are used in the arrangement. It is not sufficient to write 'synth pop uses synths so I have used synths'. Detail is required for full credit including reasons for choice, the type of synth, details of timbre, examples of 1980s artists that used similar synths.

Administration

Some centres failed to pack the CDs adequately so that they arrived broken.

In other cases work had not been thoroughly checked before sending to the examiner. Some CDs were blank or contained only data. There were also a few instances of recordings in which the original (either *Colourless Colour* in Task A, or the original track in Task B) was audible in the candidate's submission. The most likely explanation for this is that it was used as a guide track and not erased before the final mix.

It is also very important to send the work to the examiner to arrive on the required date.
Not only is this unfair on centres who submit their work on time, it also significantly delays the examiner's opportunity to spot missing CDs or logbooks and ask for replacements.
In this respect it is most important that centres retain back-up material.

Centres should refer to the *Administrative Support Guide* (formerly *Instructions for the Conduct of the Examinations* document) that is available on the GCE Music Technology website under *Assessment Materials/ Instructions for the Conduct of the Examinations*.
This document should be read in conjunction with the Specification.

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